DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 727 EA 028 221

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|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Kober, Nancy |
| TITLE | Private School Vouchers: What Are the Real Choices? |
| INSTITUTION | American Association of School Administrators, Arlington, Va. |
| REPORT NO | ISBN-0-87652-225-8 |
| PUB DATE | 96 |
| NOTE | 62p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209; world wide web: http://www.aasa.org (Stock No. 586). |
| PUB TYPE | Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC03 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Accountability; Educational Finance; Educational Quality; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; *Free Enterprise System; Private Education; *Private Schools; *School Choice; State Church Separation |

ABSTRACT

The term "vouchers" encompasses various proposals with the common goal of providing public funding to parents to use toward the costs of educating their children in a private school. This booklet presents an overview of educational vouchers and explains why they are an ineffective and inequitable strategy to improve education. Vouchers ignore the reasons for the creation of American public schools, run counter to the concept of publicly funded services, would create problems of equal access, would draw the higher achieving students from public schools, would divert resources from public schools, would grant private schools benefits while not holding them to the same accountability standards that public schools must meet, do not stimulate educational improvement, and use taxpayer contributions to support religion. The booklet concludes that parents are attracted to vouchers because of legitimate concerns that should not be dismissed, and that educators must make a collective commitment to school reform. (Contains 33 references.) (LMI)

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# Private School Vouchers: What Are The Real Choices?

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Nothing in this publication is to be taken as the official policy of the American Association of School Administrators. Rather, it is a document provided as a service to AASA members on a particular topic.

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ISBN: 0-87652-225-8
AASA Stock No.: 586

# PREFACE

Vouchers, choice, whatever you want to name it, the subject won't go away. Two recent U.S. Secretaries of Education made private school vouchers the hallmark of their administrations. Today we have at least one major presidential candidate touting it as his answer to improve education in the United States.

As guardians of a public trust that is basic to maintaining our democracy, defending and improving public education rests on our shoulders. That may seem a heavy burden to bear, but our job at AASA is to help you bear it more easily. We believe this publication will fill that bill. We don't claim to have all the answers or solve every problem; but *Private School Vouchers: What Are The Real Choices* will serve as a superb guide for you, your board, your teachers, your parents, and for your entire public constituency. This publication exposes fallacies, tackles myths, and looks into nearly every nook and cranny of the voucher myth and challenges them with real, hard facts. Please use it to help you deal with this potentially explosive topic, and give some thought to distributing it to your board and your various publics. We believe it is that good and trust you will, as well.

—*Paul D. Houston,*
*Executive Director*
*AASA*

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# OVERVIEW

Vouchers for private schools are a heated issue in education today. The term "vouchers" encompasses various proposals with the common goal of providing public funding to parents to use toward the costs of educating their children in a private school.

Yet vouchers are an ineffective and inequitable strategy to improve education for several reasons. They would produce undesirable consequences for our schools and our society. Some of the major arguments against vouchers can be summarized as follows:

- Vouchers ignore the reasons why American public schools were created and the roles public schools continue to play in our democracy: unifying a diverse people, forging a national identity and common culture, preparing people to participate in the economy, and improving social conditions, to name just a few.

- Vouchers run counter to the concept of publicly funded services when citizens demand rebates for certain services just because they choose not to use them.

- Vouchers would not provide the degree of access to private schools that advocates claim. Private schools do not have to accept every student who applies. Not all private schools will choose to participate in a voucher program or appreciably expand their enrollments. Even with a voucher, many families will not be able to afford some private schools due to transportation and other costs.

- Vouchers would draw the higher-achieving students from public schools, further concentrating students at risk in some public schools and making it more difficult for public schools to provide quality education to all.

- In addition to costing taxpayers more overall, a voucher program would divert resources from public to private schools while leaving the children with the highest educational costs, such as children with disabilities, in public schools.

- Vouchers would give private schools the benefits of public funding without obliging them to play by the same rules.

- Evidence from existing voucher programs and other school choice programs does not support the contention that choice stimulates improvement.

- Contrary to what voucher advocates claim, there is no evidence that free-market competition between public and private schools improves either. Education is a public good, not a consumable private good, and is ill-suited to the application of marketplace theories.

- Vouchers would compel taxpayers to contribute involuntarily to the advancement of religions and beliefs different from their own.

- Parents are attracted to vouchers because of legitimate concerns about their children's welfare. These concerns should not be dismissed. Vouchers, however, are an ill-advised way to address them.

A less provocative but ultimately more productive way to accomplish needed reforms in education is through collective public commitment, backed up with resources and buttressed by evidence about what works in teaching and learning.

# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

School vouchers are one of the most highly charged and divisive issues in education today. Voucher plans come in many varieties, but their common purpose is to provide public funding to parents to use toward the costs of educating their children in a private school.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PUBLICATION?

This book reviews the major reasons why vouchers for private schools are not good public policy, including reasons newly emerging from experiences with voucher-type programs and related school choice efforts around the country.

This publication aims to:

- present the main arguments against vouchers in a concise and straightforward way;
- address some of the zealotry, misrepresentations, and exaggerated claims that have characterized the voucher debate; and
- inform administrators, parents, and citizens about the implications and repercussions of the voucher concept that may not be apparent upon first or even second consideration.

It is not the intent of this publication to question or deny the right of parents to choose private schools for their children. Private schools have been and will continue to be an important part of the American educational spectrum. *Rather, the central question is whether public tax money should subsidize private school expenses.*

Neither is it the intent of this publication to suggest that public schools should remain just as they are. We need to improve public education in many ways to ensure that all students receive an excellent education. But as the points made in the following pages attempt to demonstrate, vouchers are an ineffective, unfair, and risky way to try to accomplish that. Devoting resources, attention, and commitment to public school improvement is a less provocative but ultimately more productive approach to reforms.

## WHY BE CONCERNED ABOUT VOUCHERS?

In recent years, vouchers and related proposals have been an active issue at the federal, state, and local levels.

- At this writing, legislation is pending in the U.S. House of Representatives to authorize federally funded scholarships to private schools for low-income students in 100 demonstration sites around the country. Earlier this year, a plan for federally funded vouchers in the District of Columbia ended with a Senate filibuster.

Variations on voucher proposals have been introduced, debated, and in some cases put to public referenda in several states, but no statewide program has been enacted. *[See sidebar—Voucher Activity at the State Level.]*

### *Private School Voucher Activity at the State Level*

Roughly half the states have adopted intradistrict or interdistrict open enrollment or choice plans affecting public schools only. Initiatives encompassing private schools, though not as common, have been considered by several states in recent years. Some proposals involving private schools have been put to the voters in the form of state referenda. Others have been in the form of bills before the state legislature. Some are still pending.

### STATE REFERENDA ON VOUCHERS OR TUITION TAX CREDITS.

In recent years, several states and the District of Columbia have considered state referenda concerning vouchers, tuition tax credits, or tuition reimbursements. All have been rejected.
(See Table 1.)

**TABLE 1**

*State Referenda on Vouchers or Tuition Tax Credits*

| State (including Washington, D.C.) | Year | Referendum | Result (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nebraska | 1970 | Tuition reimbursement | Rejected 57% to 43% |
| Maryland | 1972 | Voucher program | Rejected 55% to 45% |
| Michigan | 1978 | Voucher program | Rejected 74% to 26% |
| Washington, D.C. | 1981 | Tuition tax credit | Rejected 88% to 11% |
| Oregon | 1990 | Tuition tax credit | Rejected 67% to 33% |
| Colorado | 1992 | Voucher program | Rejected 67% to 33% |
| California | 1993 | Voucher program | Rejected 70% to 30% |

**OTHER STATE LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY.**

Several state legislatures (and in the case of the District of Columbia, the U.S. Congress) have taken up legislation relating to private school vouchers and similar plans. Table 2 shows legislation that was enacted or defeated. It does not include bills that were introduced but not voted on by the legislature.

**TABLE 2**

*Other State Legislative Activity*

| State | Year | Legislation | Action |
|---|---|---|---|
| Illinois | 1980 | Voucher legislation | Defeated |
| Wisconsin | 1990 | Voucher plan for Milwaukee | Enacted; expanded in 1995; pending court decision |
| Puerto Rico | 1993 | Voucher program | Enacted; court found unconstitutional |
| Ohio | 1995 | Voucher pilot for Cleveland | Enacted; pending court decision |
| Washington, D.C. | 1996 | U.S. Congress proposed federally funded vouchers | Killed by filibuster |

Sources: Education Commission of the States, Legislative Activities Involving Open Enrollment (Choice); Clearinghouse Notes (1996, May); and Doerr, E., Menendez, A. J., and Swomley, J. M. *The Case Against School Vouchers*. Silver Spring, MD: Americans for Religious Liberty (1985).

State legislatures have approved private school voucher programs for two urban school districts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Cleveland, Ohio.

- In 1990, the Wisconsin legislature approved a voucher-type program for the city of Milwaukee. Under the original terms of the program, which has now been operating for six years, vouchers could be used at the city's public schools and private nonsectarian schools. In school year 1994-95, the Milwaukee Parental Choice program provided vouchers worth $3,209 to 830 low-income children.

  In 1995, an expansion of the program was approved to include private religious schools, but an injunction blocked implementation of that component pending a court decision on its constitutionality. In March 1996, the Wisconsin Supreme Court issued a split decision (3-3) on whether the inclusion of religious schools violated the state constitution, thereby sending the issue back to a lower court to decide.

- In 1995 the Ohio legislature approved a pilot voucher program for Cleveland that includes private religious and other private schools. This program is on hold until a state court decides on its constitutionality.

### HOW DO VOUCHERS DIFFER FROM "SCHOOL CHOICE"?

Vouchers are one of several strategies, known collectively as "school choice," that expand publicly funded options for students to attend schools other than their neighborhood schools.

- Some of these approaches, such as magnet schools or open enrollment, involve choices only among public schools.

- Other strategies, such as vouchers, tuition tax credits, and certain scholarship programs, cover attendance at private schools, and in some cases private religious schools.

- This publication focuses on proposals that channel public funds to *private* schools; it does not address or take a position on choice programs limited to public schools.

### BUT "CHOICE" SOUNDS APPEALING ON ITS FACE.

By promoting vouchers as a means to give parents greater choice among schools, advocates have tapped into an attractive and very American concept of individual freedom; after all, who doesn't like to have a choice? It is understandable and admirable that parents would want to choose the best possible educational program for their children.

But educational "choice" is a very general concept that can mean many different things to different people, and may end up meaning something quite unlike the picture that advocates paint.

- Vagueness about details works in the interest of voucher advocates. Choice becomes like a magic mirror in which people see their own hopes and desires.

- Advocates tend to speak in lofty terms about what vouchers will accomplish: private school choice will foster competition among public and private schools, which, in turn, will make schools perform better and be more responsive to parents. In short, the architects of the voucher movement have developed a neat theory about how a voucher program is *supposed* to work. But when translated into actual programs, theories tend to take unpredictable turns or confront unexpected obstacles.

## THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS.

Before being seduced by the notion of choice, citizens are advised to look beyond the rhetoric and examine the specifics of what is being proposed.

A workable voucher program involves myriad decisions about such issues as the following:

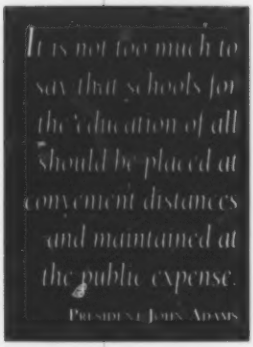
- Can vouchers be used at religiously affiliated private schools? What about all-boys or all-girls schools?
- Will the program cover all grades, K-12?
- Will vouchers go only to economically needy families or to all families regardless of income? Will they go to parents who school their children at home?
- Will tuition be reimbursed for students who already attend private schools?
- How much will the voucher be worth? Will the amount be the same for everybody? Is it enough to cover the tuition of the average private school?
- Will transportation costs be covered?

Even after the basic parameters are established, voucher program planners must make other important decisions such as the following:

- What information will parents be given to help them make decisions about schools?
- To what extent will private schools be regulated in terms of anti-discrimination policies, special education policies, curricula, and teacher standards?
- How will school performance be evaluated?

It is in all these details where the real effects, motives, and choices involved in voucher plans become apparent. This publication takes a closer look at some of these details and their implications for public schools.

# PART 1.
# WHY IS PUBLIC EDUCATION SO IMPORTANT?


It is not too much to say that schools for the education of all should be placed at convenient distances and maintained at the public expense.
President John Adams

In our democracy, public education is a common good provided for the benefit of society as a whole. To appreciate fully what vouchers would signify for American education, one must consider why public schools came into being in the first place. A brief look at the history and purposes of public education in the United States suggests that vouchers would chisel away at some of the basic principles undergirding the concept of public education and would not serve the national interest.

## A. VOUCHERS FAIL TO CONSIDER THE HISTORICAL REASONS WHY PUBLIC SCHOOLS WERE ESTABLISHED.

Public education is a mainstay of democracy. Public schools were founded, first and foremost, to ensure a well-educated citizenry equipped to carry out the responsibilities of democratic government. Public schools also assumed other missions deemed to be in the national interest:

- unifying people from a variety of ethnic and immigrant groups;
- conveying a common American culture;
- preparing people to earn a living and better their lot in life;
- improving social conditions; and
- eliminating inequities.

By and large, these reasons remain valid today. But voucher programs ignore these important functions of public education and instead seek to channel resources and citizen support away from public schools at a time when we should be strengthening them.

We ought not to forget that public schools were established because many children were not well-served or were left out by the haphazard assemblage of church-run schools, charity schools, tuition schools, and private tutoring that existed in the early years of our nation.

Vouchers would precipitate a return to a fragmented system not unlike the arrangements that characterized American schooling in the early 19th century.

### B. Vouchers run contrary to the basic concept of publicly funded services when citizens demand rebates for certain services just because they choose not to use them.

Citizens pay taxes to support public schools, just as they pay taxes to support police departments, roads, parks, and other municipal and government services. All parents have the right to send their children to these free public schools. If they decide to send their children to private schools instead, that is their prerogative. But it is unfair to other taxpayers and contrary to the notion of pooled resources for nonusers to expect an additional payment from the public till. It is almost akin to double taxation: taxing once to support free public schools and again to subsidize certain nonpublic schools.

*Vouchers are like a person who doesn't drive on the highways asking the government to refund his share of the highway costs. But he still wants an ambulance at his doorstep when he needs it.*

Mark Bucheister, Association of California School Administrators

### C. Common goals will not be met through the "everyone for himself" mentality embodied by vouchers.

Vouchers put possible benefits to individuals above the common good. Vouchers encourage better-off parents to abandon public education by promising them a more secure future for their children. But it is a hollow promise because it ignores what happens to the majority of our children and fails to recognize that the fates of all Americans are intertwined.

- The notion that "other people's kids are not our problem" is very short-sighted. Where will it lead our nation in 20 years, when the children now entering school are adults? Most likely, to a society with even deeper chasms between the haves and have-nots.

### D. PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE AN IMPORTANT FORCE IN PRESERVING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND A NATIONAL IDENTITY.

Vouchers test whether we want to live as one nation or a society of segregated and competing interests. It will be difficult to maintain a common culture if our population is "balkanized" from childhood along religious, ideological, ethnic, social class, and other lines.

In today's society—characterized by high mobility, moribund downtowns, isolated inner cities, gated communities, and omnipresent electronic media—people have limited regular opportunities to get to know individuals different from themselves, which can lead to distorted views about what "other" people are like. Public schools are one of the few institutions that bring together young people from various backgrounds—an important goal in today's diverse society.

In some declining neighborhoods—whether in the inner cities or in small towns—libraries have closed, churches have moved, businesses have left, but still the public schools open their doors every weekday morning. Preserving and strengthening the school is vital not only to the education of the neighborhood children but also to the survival of the neighborhood or town itself.

- In the Minnesota open enrollment program, some small schools or districts had to close or consolidate when they lost students. These closings had a ripple effect because the school was the focal point for community identity, activities, and services.

## PART 2.
## CHOICE FOR WHOM? ACCESS FOR WHOM?

For several reasons, vouchers are unlikely to give parents the degree of access to private education that proponents promise. Indeed, instead of giving most families their choice of schools, vouchers are more likely to give private schools their choice of students.

> *Even with a voucher in hand, parents don't choose their schools; private schools choose you. Even with that voucher, you're not free to go out and select whichever school you want unless you fit their criteria. . . . So in a very real sense, it's a cruel hoax to promise people access to something that they are not likely to have access to.*
>
> Eva Eagle, superintendent, Cedar Rapids Community School District, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

### A. PRIVATE SCHOOLS CAN BE SELECTIVE ABOUT WHICH STUDENTS THEY ADMIT.

Private schools can handpick their students. They are under no obligation to take everyone who applies—which is the antithesis of the philosophy behind public schooling.

- Some elite private schools reject two out of every three applicants.

Private schools routinely turn down students for a variety of stated and unstated reasons. For instance, the student has low entrance test scores, wrote a poor essay on the application, hasn't taken geometry, got a D in English last year, has a spotty attendance record, exhibits disciplinary problems, or didn't interview well. Or the parents can't afford the extra costs, are unavailable or unwilling to do the required volunteer work for school, or belong to a different church than the school's orientation.

- According to a 1987 report of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 71 percent of Catholic high schools, 43 percent of other religious schools, and 66 percent of independent schools require entrance exams for admission.



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- According to a 1992 survey of California private schools conducted by Ronald Corwin and colleagues at the Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL), three fourths of the schools that reportedly were ready and willing to accept voucher students required new students to be achieving at grade level as a condition for admission.

- Seventy-one percent of Catholic schools cited student discipline as a chief admissions criterion in the 1987 NCES report.

Private schools also factor into the admissions process various nonacademic forms of selectivity not allowed in public schools, such as family and alumni connections, religious orientation, ideology, and athletic ability.

Even after a student is admitted, private schools can expel anyone who exhibits a learning, behavior, or discipline problem, or commits a minor or major infraction.

- In the Milwaukee program, several students were dismissed from private schools because of discipline problems.

Where do the students go who are rejected or expelled from private schools? They go to the public schools, which have an obligation to educate all students, regardless of achievement, economic level, social status, religion, disability, or attitudes.

### B. VERY FEW PRIVATE SCHOOLS PROVIDE SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY, OR OTHER SPECIAL NEEDS.

Unlike public schools, private schools do not have to admit students with disabilities, hire special education teachers, provide special education programs, or comply with all the complex and often costly requirements of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

- According to *The Condition of Education 1995*, public schools were far more likely than private schools to offer special education. Only 25 percent of private school fourth graders attended schools that offered programs for children with disabilities, compared with 92 percent of public school fourth graders.

Private schools are less likely than public schools to enroll or offer special services for limited English proficient (LEP) students.

- According to *The Condition of Education 1995*, 52 percent of public school fourth graders attended schools that offered English as a second language, compared with only 14 percent of private school fourth graders; for bilingual education services, the corresponding figures were 23 percent of public school fourth graders and 4 percent of their private school cohorts.

- In California, a state with a high percentage of residents whose native language is not English, only 3.5 percent of the voucher-receptive private schools in the SWRL survey reported providing some type of language support for LEP students in 1992.

### C. NOT ALL PRIVATE SCHOOLS WILL AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN A VOUCHER PROGRAM.

Parents who want to use vouchers to gain their children admittance to exclusive private schools may discover that these schools are not interested in participating in a voucher program. Elite preparatory schools have little incentive to accept vouchers; they already have more qualified applicants than spaces, and their tuition usually exceeds the voucher amount.

- According to the 1992 SWRL survey of California schools, the private schools that expressed the most interest in accepting voucher students were Catholic schools, schools with tuitions that did not exceed

$2,600, and schools that already had larger class sizes than public schools.

Many private schools are already filled or near capacity. If the voucher amount does not cover full tuition—let alone the extra renovation or construction costs that expansion may entail—a private school will have little impetus to expand.

- Some private schools like the stability and long-range planning opportunities that limited enrollments give them. They may want to keep their class sizes small and predictable.

There are other reasons, in addition to size and costs, why some private schools would decide not to participate in a voucher program:

- Some private schools eschew government involvement as a matter of ideology or a means of emphasizing their independence.

- Some private schools may fear that involvement in a voucher program and its accompanying rules would change their distinctive character.

### D. THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH PRIVATE SCHOOLS, OR ENOUGH ROOM IN EXISTING PRIVATE SCHOOLS, TO ACCOMMODATE MORE THAN A SMALL SHARE OF ALL K-12 PUPILS.

Although voucher advocates speak of the keen competition that would be provoked between public and private schools, only a deluge of new private schools or a construction boom in existing private schools could make this a reality.

- In 1993, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), private schools enrolled about 12 percent of all children in grades K-8 and about 9 percent of pupils in grades 9-12.

- The SWRL survey of California private schools found that most were at or near capacity, and that many others couldn't expand significantly without remodeling. Without an ambitious construction program, the study concluded, the California voucher proposition (which was ultimately defeated by the electorate) could not have accommodated more than 1 to 3 percent of California public school students.

### E. AVAILABILITY AND LOCATION OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS WOULD LIMIT SOME STUDENTS' ACCESS TO PRIVATE EDUCATION.

Concentrations of private schools vary greatly by region, state, and locality.

- In Nevada there were only 58 private schools in 1993; in North Dakota, just 59, according to NCES.

- Some communities have very few private schools. It is not uncommon in some rural areas to find no private schools within an hour's drive of a child's home.

### F. VOUCHERS WILL NOT COVER THE FULL COSTS OF ATTENDANCE AT MANY PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

Many private schools charge tuitions in excess of the $3,000 or so often proposed as a voucher amount.

- In 1993-94, according to NCES, the average private school tuition for grades kindergarten through 12 was $3,116. The average K-12 tuition for nonsectarian schools was considerably higher at $6,631.

- In 1993-94, over 2,900 private schools—or about 11 percent of the total private schools in the nation—charged tuitions of more than $5,000. And elite boarding schools may charge more than $10,000 per year.

- The SWRL survey of California private schools found that a voucher worth $2,600 (the amount proposed under the 1993 California ballot initiative) would cover full tuition at somewhat more than half the private schools responding. Most schools with tuitions at or below the voucher amount were Catholic elementary schools. Catholic secondary schools tended to be more expensive; the proposed voucher amount was insufficient to cover tuition at four out of five Catholic high schools.

- Private schools set their own tuitions. A school could raise its tuition from one year to the next, and a school that is affordable for a voucher family one year may not be the next.

Tuition is not the only cost to consider; families also would face expenses for books, uniforms, other fees, and, most notably, transportation.

### G. TRANSPORTATION COSTS AND AVAILABILITY WOULD AFFECT ACCESS TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

With some exceptions, private schools generally do not provide transportation for their students.

- More than 75 percent of the students attending voucher-receptive California private schools arrived by family car, the SWRL survey found; nearly all the rest walked. It was unusual for students to come by bus or other public transportation.

- In rural areas and small towns, where public transportation is limited or nonexistent, students would have no way to get to a private school, unless a parent could drive them.

- A student who lives in the inner city would have a very long train or bus ride—and a costly fare each day—to get to and from a private school in the suburbs.

Subsidizing transportation expenses would add considerably to the public costs of a voucher program. And failing to subsidize transportation would exclude many low-income children from using their vouchers.

### H. SOME PROPOSALS WOULD GIVE PUBLICLY FUNDED VOUCHERS TO CHILDREN WHO ALREADY ATTEND PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

The primary beneficiaries of some voucher plans would be families who already send their children to private school—mostly middle-income and upper-income families who can afford private education without a subsidy.

### I. VOUCHERS ARE LIKELY TO EXACERBATE INEQUITIES AND STRATIFICATION BY INCOME AND RACE.

Unless the voucher plan includes an income ceiling, vouchers would tend to help middle- and upper-income families more than low-income families.

- Children from low-income families would be limited to private schools with tuitions at or below the voucher amount. And their families would have to find some way to cover transportation costs and other fees, or else be out of luck. Children from higher-income families who can afford all the attendant costs would be able to use their vouchers at a wider range of schools.

- In Minnesota's open enrollment program—which involves only public schools—participation of low-income families and minority families was nevertheless constrained by such factors as limited transportation, isolation, and inadequate access to

information, according to a study of the program conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (Hakim).

- Private school admissions criteria tend to favor children from middle- or upper-income families, who are more likely than children from poor families to demonstrate high academic achievement, have completed the necessary academic courses, have parents with high educational levels, and come from families who are well-informed about their options and aggressive in tracking the admissions process.

- Private schools can recruit the kinds of students they want more aggressively than they do other students—for example, by scheduling personal interviews with some students while merely providing others with written materials.

Although vouchers undoubtedly would enable some students from low-income families to attend private schools, these chosen few would constitute a very small percentage of all low-income children. The vast majority of low-income children would remain in their neighborhood public schools.

- From a pool of many voucher applicants, private schools could skim the highest-achieving, most talented, and most motivated low-income and middle-income children from the public schools.

- According to a study of San Antonio's magnet school programs (as reported in a volume edited by Bruce Fuller and others), students selected for the magnet schools on the basis of academic criteria tended to come from relatively better-off families with college-educated parents. The families that applied to the magnet programs—which were created several years ago to enhance educational opportunities for Hispanic children—were more than twice as likely to have

annual incomes over $35,000 as the families who either were turned down or did not apply. Conversely, significantly higher numbers of children who were not admitted or did not apply came from families earning less than $10,000 per year. The results likely would be even more pronounced with private school admissions criteria.

Studies of existing public and private school choice programs indicate that choice can aggravate racial and socioeconomic disparities.

- According to an analysis of enrollment data in Florida by political science professors Kevin Smith and Kenneth Meier, two factors correlated with large private school enrollments within a given district. One factor was the presence within the district of a higher percentage of Catholic families, which suggests, not surprisingly, that private schools fill a demand for religious education. The other factor was a higher than average percentage of African American students enrolled in the *public* schools in the district, which suggests some degree of "white flight." (Incidentally, this study found no causal link between high private school attendance and low public school quality as measured by achievement test scores.)

- White and black Milwaukee 10th graders interviewed by Smith and Meier in 1994 said that the racial composition of a school would play a significant role in their enrollment decisions.

- Data from existing choice programs corroborates that economic status has a bearing on participation in choice programs. In Minnesota, for example, families using open enrollment are far more highly educated than the state population as a whole, the U.S Department of Education study found.

- In the public school choice program of Montgomery County, Maryland, white families tended to request transfers to schools with fewer minority children, researcher Jeffrey Henig observed, while minority families tended to request transfers to schools with fewer white children. Some of the requested transfers were turned down to keep the program from sharpening school segregation.

- According to a collection edited by Fuller et. al. that reviewed public school choice programs in five districts, these programs tended to foster racial and economic segregation. A fairly high degree of regulation restricting which students can transfer where is necessary to maintain racial integration in public school choice programs.

- Great Britain's experience with school choice under the Education Reform Act of 1988, which allowed open enrollment among state-funded schools, demonstrated that choice was intellectually impoverishing some schools in working-class neighborhoods and enriching schools in middle-class neighborhoods. Most student transfers in this program have been from schools in working-class areas to schools in middle-class areas, with some "white flight" from schools with high proportions of immigrant children. (Maddaus, 1991, and Cookson, 1994).

- As many Americans still remember, some Southern states used "freedom of choice" plans to sidestep integration in the 1950s and 1960s. Parents could receive subsidies for private school costs in the form of vouchers or tax credits. Arguments of individual rights, educational quality, and local control—rather than overtly racist arguments—were used to justify such anti-integration strategies as minority-to-majority school transfer plans, government-supported

segregation academies, and tuition grants to segregated schools. This history speaks to the need to scrutinize carefully the purposes and likely effects of any choice proposal.

### J. SOME PARENTS MAY NOT GET THE INFORMATION THEY NEED TO MAKE WELL-INFORMED CHOICES ABOUT SCHOOLS.

Pursuing the admissions procedures of private schools takes time, energy, and know-how. The issue is not whether low-income parents want a good education for their children or whether they can make good choices—of course they do and they can. But there are several reasons why it might be more difficult for low-income parents to obtain ample information about their options.

- Low-income families, and especially single parents, often spend large amounts of time and energy taking care of immediate material needs—leaving less time to visit schools or collect and study information.

- Low-income parents may be isolated from the kinds of word-of-mouth information about private schools that middle- and upper-income parents take for granted—parents whose friends' daughter attended such-and-such a school or who discuss the relative merits of various private schools when they meet socially.

- Some low-income parents have low levels of literacy or English proficiency, which hinder them from analyzing written materials about schools.

- There is evidence that economic status correlates with how parents use information in choosing schools. For example, in the Montclair, New Jersey, public school choice program, parents with family incomes under $30,000 tended to use fewer sources of information to make decisions, the Carnegie Foundation reported. Only half of the families in the lower-income group actually visited a school before deciding, compared

with 84 percent of those in the highest-income group. Similar discrepancies existed in families' use of written information.

The most common methods of informing parents about their choices have weaknesses.

- Several Minnesota districts use flyers and brochures as the main means of informing parents about their options under the state's public school choice program. Quite a few of these materials are self-promotional, some use terms that may be unfamiliar to parents, and many are wanting in substance. Very few of the written materials offer information about test scores, retention and graduation rates, college attendance rates, or other kinds of performance data. And districts vary widely in their efforts to disseminate materials in parents' native language.

- According to a review of school choice programs by the Carnegie Foundation, "Milwaukee's inadequate system of parent information has left most families in the dark about the 'choice' plan." Many parents lack information about their options; the most actively engaged are, not surprisingly, the most educated parents.

Schools would not necessarily have an incentive to give parents "the full story."

- A voucher program would provide incentives for self-promotion on the part of both public and private schools. The schools with the slickest or cleverest advertisements, the schools that promise the most, or the schools with the strongest marketing campaign could very well attract more students—or at least gain better name recognition—than schools with more low-key but candid information efforts. (And marketing costs money, diverting precious resources away from education services.) *[See sidebar—Questions Parents Should Ask Schools.]*

### *Questions Parents Should Ask Schools—Public or Private—to Help Them Make Good Choices*

Before enrolling children in any school, public or private, parents and community members ought to ask school officials some basic questions about the school's policies, performance, and philosophy. Among the host of appropriate questions are the following:

- What is the school's admission criteria? Does the school have a policy that any child is accepted regardless of race, gender, or disability?
- In a private school, will financial help be provided for the duration of the child's attendance at the school? In other words, will vouchers be available and accepted year after year?
- What evidence is available about student performance and overall school performance?
- How does the school assure the public that the former is accountable for student achievement?
- What supports or services are available for children who lag academically?
- What services are available for students with disabilities or limited English proficiency?
- What special programs or activities are available?
- How does the school ensure children's safety?
- What are the school's disciplinary policies?
- What transportation options are available?
- What does the school expect of parents? What parent involvement activities are available?
- What is the school's philosophy of education? What are its curriculum standards? How are textbooks and materials selected?

## PART 3.
# HOW WOULD VOUCHERS AFFECT PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Even under the broadest and most generously funded voucher proposals, the majority of students would continue to be educated in public schools. Many children would remain in public schools because their parents were satisfied with them. Some parents would prefer to keep their children close to home. Some children would not be accepted by private schools or find the special services they needed there. Some families could not afford the full costs of private schools, even with vouchers. Some parents would be confused about their options and stick with the status quo. And some parents would not take responsibility for making a decision and would be "inactive choosers."

Thus, the need for public schools is likely to be as strong as ever, even with a voucher program. But in some key respects, vouchers would impede the ability of the public schools to provide quality education.

### A. VOUCHERS WOULD DRAW THE HIGHER-ACHIEVING STUDENTS FROM PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND FURTHER CONCENTRATE STUDENTS AT RISK IN SOME PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

Vouchers encourage advantaged parents to abandon public schools instead of working to make them better. Public schools could become the places where the "throwaway children" go, thereby fueling an exodus of still more families.

- If the best students leave public schools, it could erode a critical mass of political support that has sustained public school systems. Parents of private school students might feel less obliged to increase tax support for schools attended by other people's children.

The children who remain in public schools would disproportionately include low-income children; students with

mediocre to low academic records; students with behavior problems; and children with disabilities, limited English proficiency, or other special needs—in sum, many children who require educational services with higher per pupil costs.

### B. VOUCHERS WOULD NEGATIVELY AFFECT THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION FOR THOSE WHO REMAIN IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

According to a study, headed by Donald Moore and Suzanne Davenport, of public school choice programs in four cities, the rise or expansion of choice schools did not stimulate neighborhood schools to improve. Rather, choice undermined the ability of neighborhood schools to provide effective education by decreasing their funding, funneling out the best teachers and students, lowering staff morale, creating more turnover and uncertainty, and encouraging schools to concentrate only on the high-achieving students in order to keep them in the system. These effects would likely be intensified with private school vouchers.

Vouchers would make it more difficult for public schools to plan their budgets, staffing, and scheduling by aggravating uncertainties about how many students would enroll each year.

Working conditions would likely deteriorate for teachers, leading to lower morale.

- Funding cuts and enrollment uncertainty could result in layoff notices for teachers or freezes in salaries and benefits.
- Teaching would be more difficult in public schools with higher concentrations of at-risk children.
- In response to aggressive competition for students, some schools might tie teacher rewards or sanctions to enrollment increases or declines.

# PART 4.
# HOW MUCH WOULD VOUCHERS REALLY COST?

Despite the claims of some proponents that vouchers merely redistribute existing tax dollars, vouchers do entail extra costs to the taxpayers. But perhaps an even more significant funding impact of vouchers is the redistribution of resources from the public to the private sector.

*The proposed expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, currently being litigated, would adversely affect both MPS - Milwaukee Public Schools - students and the Milwaukee property taxpayers if expansion is sustained.*

[illegible] Milwaukee Wisconsin Public Schools

### A. VOUCHERS COST TAXPAYERS MORE.

Implementing a voucher program involves additional costs. These costs may be modest or great, depending on how much the voucher is worth, which children are eligible, whether transportation costs are covered, how wide a geographic area is involved, how vouchers interact with public school funding formulas, and many other factors.

- There would be additional costs associated with the administration of a voucher program, including transportation, public information materials, marketing, planning, information gathering, and outreach.

- Duplications of effort between public and private schools and losses of economies of scale in such areas as curriculum materials and utility expenses could increase the total costs associated with vouchers.

Additional costs could increase astronomically if vouchers are provided for children already enrolled in private schools.



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- To provide a voucher worth $3,000 to the approximately 5.5 million children now enrolled in private schools would cost $16.5 billion—nearly as much as the U.S. Department of Education spends on K-12 education and more than the K-12 budgets of all but the very largest states.

- Without a single transfer from public schools, the 1993 California voucher proposition would have cost more than $1 billion in subsidies for students already in private schools.

If transportation costs are covered, they are likely to be high.

- Even choice programs limited to public schools have considerable transportation costs. In Montclair, New Jersey, transportation costs have increased by about $1.5 million annually due to the city's choice program, the Carnegie Foundation reported. And in St. Paul, Minnesota, it costs an average of $120 per student to bus public school children to their regular neighborhood schools but $350 per student—nearly three times as much—to transport them to non-neighborhood choice schools.

Estimates of the initial costs of voucher programs are not necessarily indicative of their true costs over a period of years. Often voucher proponents like to start modestly to make the program more politically palatable, then expand it. This scenario occurred in Milwaukee.

- Some lower-tuition private schools, faced with more students, capital expenses, and other responsibilities, could be tempted to raise their tuition to the maximum amount of the voucher.

Where would the extra money needed to mount a voucher program come from? Rather than raise taxes—a politically unpalatable option—policymakers would be likely to shift the necessary funding from public school allocations or other education or social programs.

### B. VOUCHERS WOULD UNFAIRLY DIVERT DOLLARS FROM PUBLIC TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

Vouchers would reduce the funding going to public education, and the losses would not always be directly proportional to the numbers of students who transferred out.

- The extent of the losses to public schools would depend on a number of factors: the value of the voucher, the relationship of the voucher to the local base-funding formula, the educational needs of the students transferring versus those staying, and the coverage of students already enrolled in private schools.

- With funding allocations for public schools declining at the same time per pupil costs for high-need students would be rising, the public educational system would be harder pressed to serve all its children effectively.

- Some public schools might have to lay off teachers, increase pupil-teacher ratios, or eliminate some courses or extracurricular activities.

- Milwaukee school officials project financial losses if the parental choice program is expanded as proposed. A recent analysis by the Legislative Fiscal Bureau disclosed that the aid paid to the Milwaukee Public Schools for 15,000 choice students (the proposed number of students under the expansion) would be $16 million less than the aid taken from the school district to pay for these students' participation.

"First," said Milwaukee Superintendent Robert Jasna, "the Choice expansion would force the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) to reduce its operating budget by an amount of money that would not be known until nearly two months into the school year. As a result, MPS would be forced to make last-minute cuts in its education programs for all children remaining in MPS. Second, the amount of the voucher for a 'choice' student would exceed the amount of aid that student would generate. As a result, the school property tax levy would be increased by the difference between the tuition voucher amount and the aid generated by each student. The only alternative to such a property tax increase would be further cuts in the operating budget and educational programs."

### C. VOUCHERS WOULD TEND TO AGGRAVATE THE ALREADY PRONOUNCED FUNDING AND ATTENDANCE DISPARITIES AMONG SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS.

If existing choice experiments are any indication, vouchers could result in considerable fluctuations in attendance patterns—and funding allocations—among schools.

- One public school district in Iowa had to raise taxes to compensate for the loss of $140,000 in state aid when 40 students transferred to a more affluent neighboring district, according to the Carnegie Foundation report. Similarly, in Minnesota one very small rural district lost half its students to a bigger town nearby.

### D. VOUCHERS WOULD NOT NECESSARILY STRENGTHEN THE OVERALL FINANCIAL PICTURE FOR PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

Some private schools would probably incur additional costs from participating in a voucher program—if their tuition exceeded the voucher amount but they accepted some voucher students anyway, if they needed to undertake construction or remodeling, or if they began admitting more children with disabilities, limited English proficiency, or other special needs.

### E. CONTENTIONS THAT PRIVATE SCHOOLS HAVE LOWER PER PUPIL COSTS AND CAN EDUCATE STUDENTS MORE EFFICIENTLY THAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE BASED ON DATA THAT OFTEN ARE INACCURATE AND MISLEADING.

Public-private school cost comparisons often do not count all sources of revenue and support for private schools.

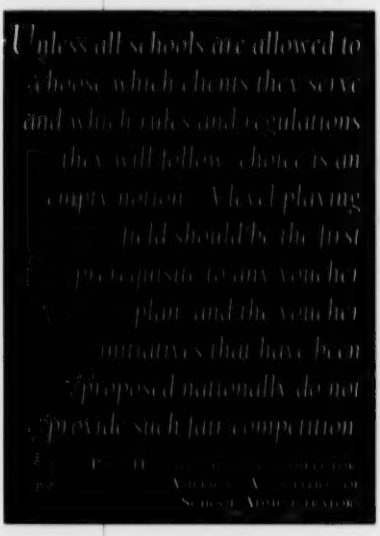
- Examples of omitted revenues include church donations, in-kind labor of teachers from religious orders, and transportation provided by parents. In the private schools of Milwaukee, for example, free parent labor amounted to a substantial subsidy.

Nor do these comparisons fairly assess public schools' costs; for example, they neglect to mention the considerable per pupil cost differentials attributable to special education.

# PART 5.
# HOW TO ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY?

To provide basic protections to students and parents, a voucher program would have to include at least some accountability requirements and designate an entity to oversee them.

Yet the kinds of regulation being discussed are unlikely to provide adequate taxpayer accountability in voucher schools or to level the playing field between public and private schools.


Unless all schools are allowed to choose which clients they serve and which rules and regulations they will follow, choice is an empty notion. A level playing field should be the first prerequisite to any voucher plan, and the voucher initiatives that have been proposed nationally do not provide such fair competition.
Virginia Association of School Administrators

### A. VOUCHERS WILL DILUTE TAXPAYER CONTROL OVER PUBLIC SPENDING.

Public schools are accountable to all taxpayers, and not just the parents in their attendance area. Taxpayers have a right to attend school board meetings, to speak up, to petition. Private schools are not overseen by popularly elected authorities and are not responsible to the voters in the same way as public schools are.

- Private schools do not have to account to the taxpayers for their admissions and disciplinary policies, funding sources, expenditures, or student outcomes. With vouchers, private schools would receive public money with very little public accountability.

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Despite the claims of voucher advocates that private schools would be more responsive to parents' desires, parents actually have less influence on the governance of private schools than on public schools.

- Private schools are governed by a board that answers to many authorities or stakeholders, including the church or other sponsoring organization, private foundation, and private organizations. The degree of parent access to this governing board is determined by the board itself.

**B. BECAUSE PRIVATE SCHOOLS ARE NOT ACCOUNTABLE TO THE CITIZENRY AT LARGE, VOUCHERS COULD SUPPORT SCHOOLS THAT ARE FAR OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM.**

Voucher schools could be established by groups with unorthodox beliefs, such as the Branch Davidians, or organizations whose teachings are repugnant to most Americans, such as witchcraft covens, neo-Nazi organizations, or Holocaust deniers.

**C. VOUCHERS COULD PROVIDE A FINANCIAL INCENTIVE FOR ILL-QUALIFIED, FINANCIALLY UNSTABLE, OR UNSCRUPULOUS ORGANIZERS TO ESTABLISH NEW SCHOOLS.**

There would be no accountability to keep schools financially and academically solvent or to prevent them from closing or being taken over by special interests.

- Under the defeated California voucher proposition, anyone who could round up 25 pupils could start a school.

- As indicated by the U.S. Department of Education experience with federal student college loan programs, in the past some for-profit vocational trade schools have made unsubstantiated claims or grand promises in order to attract student dollars.

### D. Under a voucher program, public and private schools would not have to play by the same rules.

Public schools must accept all comers. They must comply with more extensive federal and state regulations than private schools. They must adhere to anti-discrimination laws relating to race, gender, disability, and age. They must comply with various other legal requirements relating to student dismissal or expulsion, employee rights, privacy of student records, disclosure of data to parents, prohibition against psychological testing, and many other areas. Public schools also have to adhere to state standards regarding safety, curricula, teacher certification, environmental protections, and employee rights and protections.

Private schools are held to different standards for antidiscrimination; for example, single-sex schools are permissible. Students and parents have only those rights specified in the school contract. Private schools must comply with a few rules imposed by the Internal Revenue Service on private boards, but by and large, they are exempted from federal education requirements as long as they do not directly receive federal funding.

Voucher proponents do not want to level the field. They want private schools to continue to be able to choose which students to serve and which rules to follow.

### E. Some regulation is necessary to protect the interest of children and parents.

At a minimum, voucher programs should ensure that private schools do not discriminate or defraud consumers or engage in corruption.

- In addition, it may be desirable to regulate private schools in such areas as children's health and safety, minimum curriculum content, teacher qualifications, hiring and firing policies, fairness in admissions, policies for discipline and expulsion, data collection and reporting, evaluation requirements, truth in advertising, program stability (discontinued advertised programs, for example), and policies for handling custodial disputes.

- The Milwaukee experience corroborates the need for oversight. There have been allegations published in the *Milwaukee Journal* of schools not providing what they promised, students not receiving adequate education in private schools, and students being subjected to inappropriate discipline. And, as noted in the University of Wisconsin study, one Milwaukee voucher school shut down in the first year of the program and subsequently went bankrupt.

Some agency or body would have to be responsible for monitoring requirements and administering the voucher program: ensuring that vouchers are properly used, recovering misused funds, verifying that private schools are offering what they say, providing information to parents, ensuring nondiscrimination, and conducting auditing, accounting, and record keeping.

- This body would have to be independent of the schools being overseen—most likely a government or quasi-government agency—and would have to have meaningful enforcement powers.

A voucher program also should include provisions for collecting data on participation and student and school performance. Thus, some agency or independent body would have to assume evaluation responsibilities.

### F. VOUCHERS ENTAIL FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION, AND BIG CHANGES USUALLY INVOLVE SOME UPHEAVAL AND CONFUSION.

Implementation of any new concept seldom goes exactly as theorized. There are almost always unforeseen circumstances, unintended consequences, and variations from site to site. Yet voucher proponents tend to dismiss the possibility that some consequences of vouchers could be harmful to children or make our educational system worse.

Most voucher plans would not give government (or any other institution) sufficient responsibility to mitigate against harmful consequences.

### G. EVEN RELATIVELY SIMPLE VOUCHER PROGRAMS WILL BRING NEW ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES TO PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

Private schools could find that participation in a voucher program leads to more regulation and administrative burden than they care to assume.

- Vouchers would entail organizational and administrative tasks at the school level: predicting enrollments and attendance, collecting and disseminating information, and monitoring.

Overseeing even the most basic anti-discrimination provisions would require fairly large monitoring teams to visit all the private schools, plus several verification and reporting requirements. State or local governments may be unwilling to pay for much additional administration, so the end result is no meaningful monitoring.

## PART 6.
# HOW WILL VOUCHERS AFFECT EDUCATIONAL QUALITY?

The bottom-line issue for parents is whether vouchers are likely to improve the quality of education for participating children. Evidence from current private school choice programs and other data on educational performance indicate no cause for enthusiasm.

### A. PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE GENERALLY BETTER THAN THEIR CRITICS ACKNOWLEDGE AND PROVIDE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES EQUAL TO OR BETTER THAN MANY PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

Voucher proponents contend that public schools are failing miserably and that private schools represent the best hope for educating children. This argument has gotten a toehold because it taps into perceptions about public schools popularized in the media and circulated by politicians with specific agendas for public education. But these perceptions are not based on objective evidence.

Public schools are successful by many standards. And they have improved significantly over the past several years on many measures of school quality, particularly those areas that have received high priority. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in *The Condition of Education*:

- Graduation rates rose between 1971 and 1994, and dropout rates fell.
- More students are completing core academic courses and more advanced courses than did students a decade ago.

- Students have increased average achievement over the past 15 years in such core subjects as mathematics and science; in other subjects, such as reading, achievement is at about the same level as 15 years ago, in spite of social and fiscal pressures.

- The achievement gap between minority children and white children has narrowed somewhat.

- More students are attending and graduating from college than did 15 years ago.

This is not to say that everything is rosy in public education. We need to do a better job in many areas, including the following:

- improving performance in basic academic subjects among all students, particularly attainment of higher-order skills and knowledge;

- spending more instructional time on important subjects;

- improving graduation rates among minority students;

- eliminating achievement gaps between minority children and white children, and between economically disadvantaged and advantaged children; and

- reducing educational and funding disparities among schools and districts.

There *are* differences in average test scores of public and private school children. As a notable example, private school students score somewhat higher than public school students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests of reading and mathematics proficiency. But the NAEP itself cautions against using

this data to make simplistic inferences about the relative effectiveness of public and private schools. As NAEP reports note, performance differences are related in part to significant differences in socioeconomic factors and parent educational levels among public and private school children.

A survey of public and private schools published by *Money* magazine in October 1994, found that in suburban areas of some affluence, public schools appeared to be doing as well as private schools and better in some places, and as such constituted a better economic value. By and large, the survey concluded, "Public schools are not lacking in experienced top-notch teachers, challenging courses, or an environment that is conducive to learning." And although not all public school students appeared eager to learn, those who were could receive "all the personal attention that private tuition money could buy."

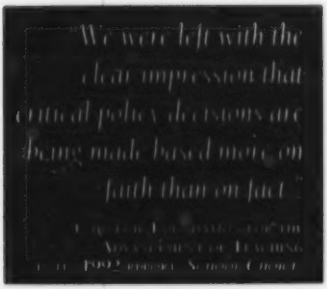
Public schools generally are better-equipped than private schools to respond to a range of student educational needs.

- Many school districts offer attractive specialized curricula at magnet schools, gifted and talented education programs, a variety of instructional experiences, and a wider extent of academic courses than private schools.

- In addition, they offer a range of services for students with special learning needs.

Most schools, whether public or private, do not simply succeed or fail. Rather, they have many objectives that they achieve with varying degrees of success. Some schools may do well with some students, some subjects, or certain curricula.

## B. Evidence from existing voucher programs and other school choice programs does not support the contention that choice stimulates improvement.




*Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

Data from an evaluation of the Milwaukee school choice program, conducted by John Witte and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, reveal mixed outcomes, with no overall improvements for choice students on the crucial indicator of academic improvement.

- After five years (1990-91 to 1995-96), the achievement of choice students, as measured by standardized tests, was essentially no different than the achievement of Milwaukee public school students. If there was any difference, public school students did somewhat better in reading.

- Significant numbers of students did not stay in choice schools in Milwaukee; attrition has ranged from 44 percent in the first year of the program to 24 percent in the fifth year. About half of these students returned to Milwaukee public schools.

*Public School Choice Programs*

Evidence on public school open enrollment programs is mixed, with some districts showing improvements in student performance but others showing no change.

- Although educational gains have been made in some choice districts, several factors besides choice appear to be having an impact, not the least of which is additional district funding, the Moore and Davenport study found.

- A national study of 60 choice schools by Lauren Sosniak and Corinna Ethington reported no significant differences between these schools and a matched group of non-choice schools in terms of curriculum content, time spent on instruction, homework, school organization, extracurricular activities, or experience and educational level of teachers.

- Statewide open enrollment programs have not shown educational gains attributable to choice, according to the Carnegie Foundation report.

***Newfoundland, Canada***

In September 1995, citizens of Newfoundland voted to change the province's traditional system of church-controlled, tax-supported schools to a publicly funded, publicly controlled school system, thereby ending a long history of church control.

- The vote was significant because it marked the rejection of tax support for denominational schools—a concept not unlike vouchers—by an electorate that has never known another type of educational system.

***Netherlands***

Under Dutch law, any group can become a provider of education and receive public funding. This system has produced a large number of small schools but also has resulted in considerable overhead and inefficiency and surprisingly little innovation and variety, as reported by Smith and Meier. Despite the freedom to found alternative schools, the curricula and structure of most schools are relatively uniform.

## PART 7.
## WHY NOT HAVE SOME HEALTHY COMPETITION?

Vouchers attempt to apply free-market economic theory to the educational arena. Advocates hold that competition among public and private schools will stimulate improved performance and greater innovation among the public school "monopoly," which currently has little incentive to reform. Under this model, parents and students—the "consumers" of education—will vote with their feet. Schools that can't compete well in this environment will lose students and eventually have to shut down.

But there are many logical and practical flaws in applying this free-market model to schools.

### A. SCHOOLS HAVE CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAKE THEM ILL-SUITED TO A FREE-MARKET MODEL.

Voucher advocates frame education as a consumer good that parents buy for children from a vendor, but education is much more—it is a public good.

- The whole society benefits when children are well-educated, in terms of a more capable workforce, stronger civic leadership, increased entrepreneurship, and fewer social problems. That's why citizens pay taxes for public schools.

- Without a tax basis for education, some families, left to their own devices, would not invest enough in education, to the detriment of society.

Schools do not behave in the same way as businesses.

- Schools are not driven primarily by a profit motive. When businesses are successful, they expand to meet demand and increase profits. When schools are successful, they don't necessarily want to expand.

- Markets respond to purchasing power; they cater to the rich and neglect the poor. Schools are society's main institution for overcoming the inequities that result from the unfettered workings of the marketplace and helping those that would be hurt by market biases.

### B. FREE MARKETS DO NOT NECESSARILY PROMOTE BEHAVIOR THAT IS IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF CHILDREN.

The marketplace has not always behaved responsibly when it comes to advertising, food products, or television programming aimed at children. Yet voucher proponents tout the same market forces that produced the savings and loan scandal and video games like Mortal Kombat as the salvation of education.

Free markets have not necessarily served low-income citizens well in other realms of life.

- Supermarkets in inner-city neighborhoods are not known for having a wide variety of items, fresh produce, or competitive prices. Nor have market forces produced adequate low-income housing or medical care. One must ask why we would expect market forces to produce a different outcome in education.

Decisions that individuals make are not always in the public interest—or even in their own interest.

- For example, private decisions about housing have produced patterns of racial segregation.

### C. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT COMPETITION IN AND OF ITSELF WILL IMPROVE PUBLIC EDUCATION.

Competition does not necessarily produce top-quality goods and services in other sectors of the market. Profit is the bottom line; if a cheap, low-quality product or

no-frills service draws buyers, somebody will provide it. Low-quality merchandise stays on the market because it is all that some people can afford.

- In the business world, there are different markets for people of different incomes. The quality of the car you buy depends on your budget more than on the inherent benefits resulting from competition. Lexus competes with Mercedes, not Saturn.

Competition in health care has not produced an efficient, effective system for promoting public health.

- Instead we have an expensive, cumbersome, and inequitable system in which hospitals compete for patients who can pay or have good insurance, and insurance companies compete for clients at low risk of costly illness. Several million Americans are left without health insurance, thousands of communities are left with very few providers, and the public picks up the tab for the poorest, the sickest, and the oldest. Millions of dollars are spent on emergency care instead of preventive care. By comparison, public education is an effective and responsive system.

Ambitious claims about the effects of competition on schools are based on theory and hope rather than on evidence.

- When marketplace ideas fail, it is the children who suffer. Voucher advocates would use children to test a theory.

- Advocates of vouchers are curiously vague on details about how to solve a range of sticky problems that have challenged researchers for decades, such as how to motivate people to learn, how to equalize opportunities among different students and communities, and how to pay for education. Nor are they explicit about which specific changes we can expect in which

schools, how long they will take, or how we will know when we get there.

Research on school change indicates that it takes more than lofty intentions and outside competition to reform complex organizations. It takes leadership, resources, staff expertise, commitment, and an understanding of and agreement about what should be done. It requires mechanisms to monitor outcomes and adjust the original model to address unforeseen circumstances. But voucher programs tend not to have these kinds of mechanisms, and without them, vouchers alone are unlikely to produce real reform.

### D. INCREASED COMPETITION WOULD NOT NECESSARILY IMPROVE PUBLIC OR PRIVATE SCHOOLS OF MARGINAL QUALITY, AS VOUCHER PROPONENTS PREDICT.

Parents pick schools for reasons other than academic quality: location, religious affiliation, discipline policies, perceptions of safety, sports programs, community ties, socioeconomic mix, and values.

Some schools could convince parents, at least for a while, that they are doing a better job than they really are. Parents could be influenced by a marketing campaign that pushes the right buttons or an inflated word-of-mouth reputation. Students could be wowed by dramatic new buildings, a winning sports team, or a space-age computer center.

Under a voucher system, private education could become dominated by large, private educational corporations or schools affiliated with major religious groups. Small excellent private schools may not be able to compete with the promotional momentum of large education providers and may be no more likely to stay in business than a small independent bookstore can compete with a Barnes and Noble.

# PART 8.
# WHAT CHURCH AND STATE ISSUES DO VOUCHERS INVOKE?

Sectarian and religious schools represent the largest group of private schools in the United States and enroll about 85 percent of nonpublic school students. One cannot debate the subject of private school vouchers without addressing issues of church and state.

### A. VOUCHERS WOULD COMPEL TAXPAYERS TO CONTRIBUTE INVOLUNTARILY TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND RELIGIONS DIFFERENT FROM THEIR OWN.

Religious schools were founded to integrate a religious world view into curriculum and instruction. Promoting specific religious beliefs continues to be an important part of the mission of private sectarian schools today, whether Catholic, Amish, Jewish, Lutheran, Muslim, or Adventist.

Christian fundamentalist schools are the most rapidly expanding segment of nonpublic education today. Many of these schools strive to create a totally sectarian environment and teach children an approach to life based completely on the Bible. It is not uncommon for secular content, such as math and science, to receive secondary status.

With vouchers, taxpayers would be subsidizing teachings that run counter to mainstream academic content or the beliefs of most Americans.

- For example, some of the more common textbooks used in fundamentalist Christian schools promote religious intolerance, anti-intellectualism, political extremism, bigotry, and contempt for scientific inquiry. *[See sidebar—Textbooks Commonly Used in Fundamentalist Christian Schools.]*

### *Textbooks Commonly Used in Fundamentalist Christian Schools*

A study of textbooks frequently used in Christian fundamentalist schools found that these texts embrace a world view that is greatly at odds with the views of most Americans. The books also teach academic content that departs radically from the mainstream scholarly thought in such subjects as literature and science.

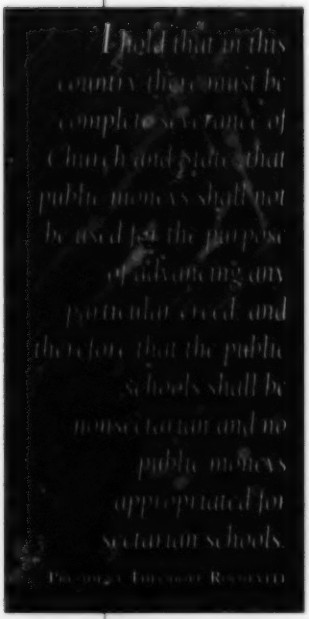
- The textbooks are highly negative toward other religions. One history textbook held that Catholicism was "a distorted Christianity that had largely departed from the teachings of the Bible."
- Major American writers are discredited for reasons unrelated to literary quality. Robert Frost is dismissed for "rejecting God's word," Carl Sandburg for promoting socialist views, and Emily Dickinson for rejecting traditional Christianity.
- The textbooks present a skewed view of history: for example, the French and Indian War was fought to preserve Protestantism. Believers of evolution are sinful. Roger Williams' Rhode Island experiment in religious freedom encouraged malcontents to settle there. African Americans are referred to as Negroes, even in a 1991 edition, and Native Americans as a heathen civilization. And one history textbook notes that "the Bible does not specifically condemn slavery."

Source: Doerr, E., Menendez, A. J., and Swomley, J. M. (1995) *The Case Against School Vouchers*. Silver Spring, Md.: Americans for Religious Liberty.

### B. VOUCHERS WILL BE SUBJECT TO CONTINUAL COURT CHALLENGES AND MAY BE FOUND UNCONSTITUTIONAL.

Voucher programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland are in the midst of court challenges. Puerto Rico's voucher system, which included religious schools, was declared unconstitutional by the Commonwealth's Supreme Court.

Many legal scholars contend that private school vouchers violate the establishment clause of the Constitution, noting that they would channel public aid to sectarian schools as a primary purpose and would have the effect of advancing religion.


I hold that in this country there must be complete separation of Church and state; that public moneys shall not be used for the purpose of advancing any particular creed; and therefore that the public schools shall be nonsectarian and no public moneys appropriated for sectarian schools.

The Founding Fathers and many other notable Americans who followed in their footsteps opposed public aid for religious bodies. President James Madison spoke out against tax assessments for religion in an effort to defeat an early proposal that was not unlike vouchers.

Children cannot always tell what is and is not endorsed by the state. Government involvement with and funding of religious education will give it the imprimatur of the state, opponents contend.

### C. RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS THEMSELVES OFTEN PREFER NOT TO ACCEPT PUBLIC FUNDING.

Government involvement with religious schools could bring pressures to secularize their content and curricula and dilute their religious functions.

# CONCLUSION

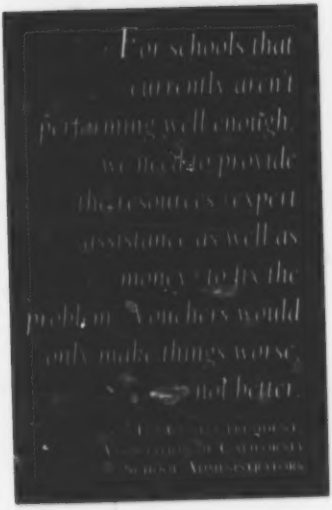
Parents are drawn to vouchers because they want the best for their children. This publication has shown that vouchers are unlikely to achieve that goal for most students, and certainly not for the nation as a whole. But there is an undeniable need to improve schools, and it can be done with clear goals and mobilized public support.

## A. PARENTS ARE ATTRACTED TO VOUCHERS BECAUSE OF LEGITIMATE CONCERNS THAT SHOULD NOT BE DISMISSED.

Parents are understandably concerned about a range of problems that have permeated schools, as well as other segments of society: crime and drugs, discipline, social deterioration, declining neighborhoods, and troubled families. Schools tend to be the locus for action because they are the most visible public institution affected by these trends and because they are entrusted with the precious resource of our children. But vouchers will not solve these larger problems; only through broad efforts at the community, state, and national levels can we hope to do that.

Parents care deeply that their children receive a high quality education and master the knowledge and skills needed to lead productive and rewarding lives. Not all of our schools are fulfilling this mission for all of our students.

The problem is not limited to public education, however. Good and bad schools exist in both sectors. The existence of some good private schools or some bad public schools does not justify the blanket conclusion that private schools by definition do a better job of dealing with difficult educational issues than public schools do.




### B. WE NEED TO MAKE A COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT TO SCHOOL REFORM.

It is time for citizens to work to improve education for all children, in both public or private schools—but not by funneling resources from one sector to the other. A less provocative but ultimately more productive way to accomplish needed reforms is through collective public commitment, backed up with resources and buttressed by evidence about what works in teaching and learning.

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## Acknowledgments

AASA wishes to express its gratitude to the author, Nancy Kober, and editors Leslie Eckard and Colleen Montoya for bringing this publication to fruition.

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